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Rainy Days Are Here: A Local Court Perspective on the Budget Cuts

By James B. Perry

As Executive Officer of the Yolo Superior Court, one of my chief responsibilities is to work closely with the Presiding Judge to develop and manage the court's budget. Budgeting is a complex and difficult task even in the best of times, but the statewide fiscal crisis has made it even more challenging. Both the Judicial Branch and the local courts have had to make difficult decisions in order to offset budget reductions while protecting court employees and the public's access to justice.

In the current fiscal year, 2009-2010, Yolo Superior Court was hit with a 1.4 million dollar budget reduction (about a 12% reduction). As local courts are State funded, we expect that severe budget reductions will continue at least through the next two fiscal years. The task before us is how to absorb the current reduction, plan for further reductions, and keep critical court operations open to the public.

Here in Yolo Superior Court we did not wait for the budget crisis. Instead, for the past several years we have been planning for expected budget shortfalls. We developed a business plan, established clear budget priorities and tested reduction strategies. To survive in the midst of the now serious budget shortfalls, we enacted a variety of cost saving options from our budget strategies. For example, we furloughed staff in conjunction with the Judicial Branch statewide court closure on the third Wednesday of every month. We also offered staff a voluntary furlough program that has been in place for three years. For the past two years, we have instituted a targeted hiring freeze resulting in a 13% vacancy rate. We have maximized operational efficiencies while reducing spending by 20% and consolidated facilities.

All of this comes, of course, with the painful reality that service to the public cannot remain at the same levels as before. While our budget has sustained severe cuts the workload has increased. With a growing population and changing state law we see more case filings than before and trials have doubled over the past three years. Not only is the courthouse closed and employees furloughed one day per month, we are doing all our work with 104.5 employees and 12.5 Judicial Officers when the workload demands a staff of 143 and 14.5 Judges. We have been forced to reduce the hours of operation for filing windows, the payment center, and telephone assistance. We understand the public's frustration with reduced services; however, it is an unavoidable consequence of the unprecedented budget crisis. We wish to thank the public, our great staff and the community justice partners for understanding the magnitude of this budget crisis as we make every effort to continue to provide access to justice in Yolo County.

Without the planning, hard work and commitment, Yolo Superior Court would be looking at even more drastic measures such as staff layoffs, and further cutbacks in public services. We are making every effort to continue to make fiscally conservative decisions in order to maximize our resources, maintain service levels, and plan for the tough times ahead. Fortunately, for Yolo Superior Court, with the full support of our Judges, prudent management of our resources throughout the past 6 years has allowed us to prepare for the rainy days. Well, those rainy days are here and that fact begs the question: How hard will it rain and how long will it last?